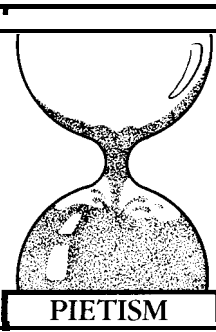


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Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"

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HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH DISPENSATIONALISTS PART TWO

by Michael R. Gilstrap

In part one of this essay, we pointed out how important it is for those who hold a postmillennial, covenantal worldview to be gracious, effective communicators. **Because postmillennialism** is so threatening to the status quo, which is heavily influenced by dispensationalism, if we are going to disseminate our viewpoint, effective communication is a must.

Last month we looked at one facet of successful communication: discerning the motivations behind a particular position. Because this newsletter's focus is dispensationalism, we examined several motivational considerations undergirding dispensationalism: the importance of the doctrine of salvation by grace, the any-moment expectation of Christ's Second Coming, reaction against the social gospel, and the reaction against Darwinism.

As important as discerning motivations is, it's not enough. This month we want to look at an additional three ingredients to effective communication: (1) Attacking problems, not people, (2) Giving and getting respect, and (3) the importance of common ground.

Attack Problems, not People

When we are seeking to convince someone of our position, one of the things we are trying to do is *motivate* him to abandon his old position. Motivation works best when people are separated from problems.

Gary DeMar, co-author of *The Reduction of Christianity* and president of American Vision, is a master at this. If you have ever heard him during a debate or radio interview, you know exactly what I mean. His motto is, "Don't ever give the other side a reason *not* to believe." He attacks issues, but he doesn't attack people.

A good example of his skill took place at a meeting of Christian leaders in October 1987. Largely the group was made up of Christian Reconstructionist and Charismatic leaders. The common link among members of the group was a commitment to Christian social activism. Some were very much in favor of social activism, others had some reservations. Some of the Charismatic leaders were sympathetic to Christian Reconstruction, others were not. Some were postmillennial, others were not.

During one of the discussion periods, the conversation moved to the issue of whether social activism was appropriate, and whether Christians were responsible to apply the faith to the culture. As a Christian Reconstructionist, Gary's answer was a definite "yes." What some of the group's members were saying was positively abhorrent to his way of thinking. One person argued that it isn't our responsibility to reform the world, but to win souls to Him.

Now, Gary *could* have risen from his seat, loaded both barrels of his spiritual shotgun with a magnum load of Christian Reconstruction shot, levelled his weapon at the offend-

ing party, and blew what few brain cells that fella had (*couldn't have had many, right?*) plumb outta his head! He *could* have done that, *but he didn't*.

Instead, Gary rose from his chair, and in a delightfully serpentine way ("wise as a serpent, harmless as a dove"), pulled one of the guns from his opponent's holsters, and used it. He *quoted to the group one of their main theologians: Charles Finney*, "the great business of the church is to reform the world. The Church of Christ was originally organized to be a body of reformers. The very profession of Christianity implies the profession and virtually an oath to do all that can be done for the universal reformation of the world."

And if that wasn't enough, he added a second quotation, "The Christian church was designed to make aggressive movements in every direction – to lift up her voice and put forth her energies against iniquity in high and low places – to reform individuals, communities, and government, and never rest until the kingdom shall be given to the people – until every form of iniquity shall be driven from the earth."¹

Gary *could* have attacked the person, but he didn't – he attacked the problem: limiting the benefits of Christ's work to the salvation of individual souls. If he had attacked the speaker, or even attacked "pietists" in general, he would have lost. Instead, he scored a dramatic victory by winning the support of his opponent, and at the same time, swinging the "fence-sitters" over to his side.

We must learn that in personal communication, negative comments and put-downs build hostility, but positive affirmations and a gracious approach lay the foundation for long-range personal relationships. As the old saying goes, "You catch more flies with honey than vinegar."

Just think about it for a moment. Consider what we are saying when we use negative, personal put-downs and insults. We are demeaning our opponent, and directly attacking that person's self-image. We might as well be saying, "If you do what I want, it proves you're as dumb as I told you."

DeMar *might* have said to his opponent, "You know, Sam (fictional name), if you *really* believed the gospel, you wouldn't have said it wasn't Christianity's job to reform the world, only to win souls. Don't you believe Jesus is Lord? The bottom line is, Sam, you *really* don't believe Jesus is Lord, do you? I guess that explains why you don't have the foggiest notion about what the gospel *really* is!"

Put yourself in Sam's place. Even if you had a small inkling to go with DeMar's position, there's no way you can

1. Charles Finney, "Letters on Revivals," quoted in Gary DeMar & Peter Leithart, *The Reduction of Christianity* (Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1988), 285

do that now! To agree with Gary DeMar is to admit that prior to this moment you didn't *really* understand the gospel. On top of that, if you believe what DeMar is saying, you've never *really* confessed Jesus as Lord. Besides, this Gary DeMar is *really* nasty! All you said was that it is primarily the mission of the church to evangelize the world. (Note Sam's perspective of his position.) If the truth were known, DeMar is the one who doesn't *really* believe the gospel!

It's very easy to write in this newsletter, "Don't attack people, attack problems," but practicing such a dictum is another matter all together. Those of us who have a sarcastic streak in our personality have a peculiarly difficult time. The natural human tendency is to allow frustrations to spill over into all areas immediately associated with it. Those of us who have been Christian Reconstructionists for any length of time at all have been called everything from "new-ager" to a "blight on the face of Christianity." We are naturally sensitive, but we must guard against allowing our frustrations to turn into personal invective against someone we disagree with.

In dealing with dispensationalists, we must separate the *what* from the *who*. When we mix problems, frustrations, and put-downs with arguments, we usually set up a "You win, I lose" situation, which has a very low success rate in discipleship situations.

If at all possible, try to set up a "You win, I win" situation. Avoid giving unnecessary offence, and side-step any put-downs directed toward you. That's what Gary DeMar did. In effect he said to the group, "Look guys, listen to what we're *really* talking about. Charles Finney is one of your big guns, isn't he? Well, listen to what he said. "Those members of the group who were a little uncomfortable had their fears eased by the quotation from Finney. Any suspicions about the "orthodoxy" of the position were quieted. Both sides were winners. It's true that not all the members of the group were convinced by the quotation from Finney, but a great deal more were convinced than if Gary had resorted to a personal attack against the group member who spoke up.

Giving and Getting Respect

This brings us to the next key ingredient for effective communication with dispensationalists: the giving of respect. We see this factor in play the week before the Super Bowl each year. Neither team *ever* says anything critical of the other team. One would think listening to the players that the other team is the best football team to ever lace up a pair of cleats, and their team is very lucky even to be in the football game. Respect for the opposition's abilities is the name of the game.

Sometimes this is called personal persuasion by communication experts. Others call it persuasion due to character. These merely echo the fact that a given in life is that often a major reason for a person's agreement with us is that we have their respect.²

One way to get respect is to give it. Respect others. Show respect for their opinion. It sets the tone for the exchange. Allow the other person ample opportunity to get his point across. Try to understand him. Don't caricature or misrepresent an opponent. Where you agree, let him

know. Put your energy into telling your side of the argument, rather than in simply concentrating on making the other person wrong. Concentrate on the positive, and avoid setting up a polarity any earlier than is absolutely necessary. Get your opponent on your side as often as possible.

For example, it is very easy to show respect for dispensationalists. They love the Lord very much, and are very aggressive in protecting the integrity and authority of the Scriptures. Additionally, as we saw last month, *salvation* by grace is a very prominent theme in their thinking. Furthermore, their seminaries have turned out rigorously trained pastors and teachers. I am most familiar with Dallas Theological Seminary, and some of the Bible teachers trained at DTS have been significant influences in the lives of thousands. Just off the top of my head I am reminded of the profound influence Howard Hendricks, Gene Getz, and Chuck Swindoll have had on my family and me. Although I also have profound disagreements with these men, that does not prevent me from showing them the respect they deserve.

As we give respect, we'll get it. In communicating with dispensationalists, this raises the acceptability of our position at least a thousand percent!

Look for Common Ground

Finally, our last point is the "common ground" principle: The more two people (or a person and a group) *perceive* themselves to be alike, the easier it will be to persuade each others. The converse is also true. The more two people *perceive* themselves to be different, the more difficult the persuasion process will be,

In dealing with dispensationalists, grounds for agreement, even if removed from the issue at hand, can be a starting point for persuasion. If you can get the other person to see that you share common motivations and convictions, your chances of persuasion increase accordingly.

We've touched upon areas of common ground (salvation by grace, authority of Scripture, etc.), but one we haven't mentioned is that dispensationalism and a covenantal/postmillennial worldview both believe a decisive transition took place in the death and resurrection of Christ. The obvious question is, "what kind of transition was it?", but we both agree that a transition took place. Another area of agreement is a belief in a divine plan for all of history. Dispensationalism has characteristically held a relatively high view of the sovereignty of God.

We could go on, but the point is, there *are* areas of agreement. By looking for the common ground when dealing with a dispensationalist, there is much more likelihood of making progress toward bringing him to our point of view.

Conclusion

The bottom line is that God has called us to have speech seasoned with salt (Col.4:6). Too much salt or too little salt ruins the speech. I truly believe dispensationalism is crumbling. A lot of fellow believers are looking for better answers to their questions about the Bible, the Church, the future, and how it all works together. We don't have all the answers, but we do have at least some of them. Let's learn to respond effectively to their questions.

2. Frederick Williams, *Executive Communication Power* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983), 20.

3. Williams, *Communication*, 23